The Messenger Matters: Using Social Media Influencers and Content Champions to Promote Prevention Efforts

You are a prevention professional, eager to capitalize on the benefits of social media to promote your successful prevention efforts. Like many of your peers, you have a Facebook page with a few hundred "friends" and a Twitter account with about the same number of followers. You post and tweet regularly—interesting articles that are consistent with your program's goals. You think hard about what you post, and your messages do prompt the occasional response. But overall, you're just not generating the attention you'd like.

So how can you make your prevention efforts more visible? One way is to think carefully about not only what you are posting, but *who* is delivering the message.

Marketing professionals have identified three types of users to promote online content: *influencers, micro-influencers,* and *content champions*. This tool describes the unique role that each of these users can play in helping you expand your online audience and increase the visibility of your efforts, drawing on real-world examples from the prevention field and offering practical guidance for how to get started.

INFLUENCERS

Influencers are individuals with large social media networks and a track record of being able to promote or sell products to large numbers of followers. Well-known influencers like Kim Kardashian West, for example, have track records of being able to grow sales of everything from diet shakes to waist trainers to hair shampoo simply by tweeting, Facebooking, or Instagramming about them. Businesses looking to grow sales will pay influencers to promote their products on social media.

- **Implications for Prevention:** While prevention efforts rarely have the financial resources to purchase endorsements, influencers can often be inspired to support health-related and public health causes that affect them personally. For example, comedian Amy Schumer has been public about her father's struggle with multiple sclerosis for much of her career. In 2015, she partnered with the National Multiple Sclerosis Society to raise awareness of the organization. The National MS Society, with Schumer's help, created the #WhenYourParentHasMS hashtag for Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to help raise awareness of the disease's impact and to raise money for the organization.
- **The Bottom Line:** Reach out to celebrity influencers if you can make a strong case linking your prevention work or campaign with their life. Do they have a connection to your cause?

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An allegiance to your community? Have they publicly struggled with a public health problem your organization is addressing? If so, you may have found the perfect partner to publicize your work!

MICRO-INFLUENCERS

Micro-Influencers are individuals who are well known within a specific online niche (such as fashion or food blogging) or within a self-contained locale (such as a town or college campus). Because they don't have the reach of an influencer, the goal of using micro-influencers is to produce a chain reaction by having them repost specific messages or images on their own social media accounts. Businesses and marketing professionals often entice micro-influencers to post on social media by giving them free products or samples, rather than by paying them directly. In return, the micro-influencer agrees to post a review or endorsement.

- **Implications for Prevention:** Consider the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) Ice Bucket Challenge that took social media by storm in August 2014. A series of micro-influencers were the key to this campaign's success. The challenge began with Jean Senerchia—a micro-influencer with a large social network—posting a video of herself dumping a bucket of ice on her head, pledging to support her husband Anthony, who is afflicted with ALS, and challenging her followers to do the same. Dozens accepted Senerchia's challenge and within days the message reached Pete Frates, a former Boston College basketball captain with his own large, social network. Frates completed the challenge and seven days later, hundreds of people across Boston were pouring ice on their heads—and posting the results. By the end of the month, the challenge had gone national, with thousands of videos posted online across the country. A chain reaction initially set off by two micro-influencers, Senerchia and Frates, inspired ordinary people to raise over $100 million for the ALS Association.

- **The Bottom Line:** Choose your micro-influencers wisely, making sure they are the right match for the problem you hope to address, and at the social center of the group you want to reach. So, for example, if your goal is reduce high-risk drinking among college students who participate in Greek life, check out the Facebook and Twitter profiles of the Greek leaders on your campus, most of whom are likely to have enormous social networks. Also think carefully about the messages you want them to deliver. More than average social media users, micro-influencers take pleasure in building large social networks and garnering online approval (I.e. "likes" or "shares") for the content they post. This means thinking carefully about developing content that your micro-influences will want to promote: that is visually engaging, has broad appeal, and that your micro-influencers will deem attractive to their followers.

CONTENT CHAMPIONS

Content champions also have large social media networks, but don't sell or promote anything. Instead they are notable for their ability to catalyze discussion. Think of them as curators of information. George Takei, the former Star Trek star, with his 9,000,000 Facebook followers, is a

prime example of a strong content champion. Takei posts regularly about LGBT equality and social justice, interspersing his content with humorous anecdotes and pictures (memes). Because content champions tend to share already existing information, many of them are found on Twitter, whose platform is ideally suited for that purpose.

- **Implications for Prevention:** Many content champions are leading researchers and writers whose professional focus is addressing medical or public health issues. For example, with over 178,000 followers, professor and author Atul Gawande uses Twitter to publicize studies and articles on his passions: reducing unequal access to health care, dissecting cutting edge medical research, and public health policy. Like many Twitter users, Gawande is apt to respond to direct tweets and retweet (repost) tweets that reference him or his work. Because the world of medical and public health researchers tends to be small, reaching out to these individuals directly on Twitter is a great way to draw attention to the prevention work you are doing.

- **The Bottom Line:** Use content champions to publicize your organization's work or promote program results. At the end of each calendar year, many medical and public health publications routinely release lists of Twitter users to watch in the field. Scour these publications to find areas of overlap between your prevention work and the content published by these users. Also search the medical literature and popular media articles and note the authors—many of whom are likely to have Twitter accounts. Reach out and tweet them directly: they will be flattered by the attention and happy to engage on social media about their work.

Using social media influencers, micro-influencers, and content champions can help you grow your online audience and increase the impact of your messaging. So the next time you have a message to post or tweet, consider your messenger! Make the right choice and you too may have thousands of people dumping ice on their heads in support of your prevention efforts!